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SE-23: PROSPECTS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INCLUSIVE
MIDDLE EAST COMMAND ORGANIZATION

March 5, 1952

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Department of State Contribution

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PROSPECTS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INCLUSIVE
MIDDLE EAST COMMAND ORGANIZATION

I. SUMMARY OF THE MEC CONCEPT

A. The MEC Concept

The MEC concept was presented to the Near Eastern governments concerned through the medium of two four-power (US, UK, France, Turkey) communications: a proposal made to Egypt on October 13, 1951 and a purely informative statement presented to the Governments of the area on November 10, 1951. Both declarations were worked out primarily between the US and the UK with France and Turkey playing a late and minor role. No state in the area was given advance information on the October 13 proposals though Egypt was told a few days earlier that the UK confidently expected to have a far-reaching proposal of Egypt's consideration. The November 10 statement was not based on area consultations but attempted to deal with area reactions to MEC.

1. Main Provisions of October 13 Proposal. The communication opened with a declaration of the vital nature of the defense of Egypt and the Middle East to the free world. It proposed an Allied Middle East Command, affirmed that France, Turkey, the UK and the US would participate and stated that invitations had been extended to Australia, New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa, who had agreed in principle.

The remainder to the communication concerned Egypt's obligations and benefits under MEC. The benefits primarily concerned status and military assistance. Egypt was invited to be a "founder member" offered

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"a position of high authority and responsibility within the Allied Middle East Command", and invited to designate "Egyptian officers for integration in the Allied Middle East Command Headquarters Staff."

In the proposal, the UK agreed to supercession to the 1936 Treaty if Egypt would cooperate fully "in accordance with the provisions of the attached annex." British forces not allocated to MEC would be withdrawn. "Facilities to train and equip her forces", were offered Egypt "by those participating members of the Allied command in a position to do so."

The technical annex stipulated Egypt's obligations. Egypt would furnish to MEC "such strategic defense and other facilities as are indispensable for the organization in peacetime of the defense of the Middle East", and would give MEC forces "all necessary facilities and assistance in the event of war, imminent menace of war, or apprehended international emergency, including the use of Egyptain ports, airfields and means of communication." Egypt would put its air force under "an air defense organization under the command of an officer with joint responsibility to the Egyptian Government and to the Allied Middle East Command for the protection of Egypt and Allied bases."¹

2. Main Provisions of the November 10 Statement of Principles.

This statement, conveyed to the Arab states and Israel, dealt solely with the principles of the MEC organization. The invitation to Egypt remained unchanged.

1. Separate proposals on the Sudan were presented concurrently by the UK alone to the Egyptian Government.

The MEC was characterized as a "center of cooperative efforts for the defense of the area as a whole." Its function would be "to assist and support the states willing to join in the defense of the Middle East and to develop the capacity of each to play its proper role in the defense of the area as a whole." Its first task would be "one of planning and providing the Middle East states on their request with assistance in the form of advice and training." The Supreme Army Commander, Middle East, "will command forces placed at his disposal and will develop plans for the operations of all forces within the area (or to be introduced into the area) in time of war or international emergency." MEC would be "an integrated Allied command not a national command." It appears agreed between the US and UK that the position of SACME would be held by a British officer.

Because of the Egyptian rejection of MEC, and because of suspicions aroused in the area by the October 13 proposal, the November 10 statement included numerous reassurances. The UN was mentioned, as it had not been on October 13. Economic aid was hinted at in the clause "achievement of peace and security in the area through the Middle East Command will bring it social and economic advancement." MEC "will not interfere in problems and disputes arising within the area." Troop movements under SACME to or within states "will be made only with the agreement of the state or states concerned." Facilities to MEC "will be the subject of specific agreements." MEC "naturally will not further

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the national interest of any particular state." A significant reassurance was that MEC would aim "to reduce such deficiencies as exist at present in the organization and capacity for defense in a vitally important area so that the peace-time role of the states of the area in the Middle East defense will progressively increase, thus permitting the peace-time role of states not territorially part of the Middle East to be decreased proportionately."

B. Reactions to the MEC Concept

No formal official reactions to the MEC statements have been made by the Near East states except by Egypt, which rejected the October 13 proposal. However, on the basis of informal reactions, official positions may be sketched as follows:

1. Egypt. The government indicated that the proposals were unacceptable to Egypt because they: a) constituted no advance from the British proposals of April 11, 1951, b) provided for continuation of British occupation, c) were in some respects less acceptable than the Treaty of 1936 because they did not mention any time limits and provided for a military occupation by four foreign powers instead of one.

King Farouk has indicated privately to the US Ambassador that he is more favorably disposed toward MEC than his government. However, he is unlikely to press for acceptance of the MEC concept unless the principal of unity of Egypt and the Sudan under the Egyptian Crown is recognized by the UK.

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Public opinion among practically all politically conscious elements in Egypt is opposed to the MEC, though mainly as a subordinate part of the broader and deeper resentment against the presence of British troops in any guise on Egyptian territory.

2. The other Arab States. The private reaction to MEC of most governmental leaders in the other Arab states was not initially unfavorable. However, adverse reaction of public opinion and their desire to avoid offending the Egyptians (or appear less patriotic and "anti-imperialist" than the Egyptians), have prevented open official approval of MEC. It is highly probable that if Egypt should decide to join MEC, the other governments would attempt to follow suit.

3. Israel. The Israel Government appreciates the importance of MEC, however, it believes its association can be just as effective and less embarrassing if the relationship is informal. Israel fears that open cooperation would set up a bar to Jewish immigration from the Soviet orbit. It distrusts its neighbors and is therefore loathe to reveal information on its military forces. Israel would prefer arrangements with the US and UK rather than with MEC.

However, Prime Minister Ben Gurion read to the Knesset on February 27 the text of a note sent to the Kremlin assuring the USSR that Israel would not join any aggressive pact against it. The note added that although Israel has not been invited to join MEC, the sponsoring powers had assured Israel that their intentions were not aggressive.

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II. MAJOR FACTORS AFFECTING THE FORMATION OF AN INCLUSIVE MEC ORGANIZATION

A. British Relationships with the Arab States

Historical and psychological factors involving the UK are the most important cause of Arab opposition to the idea of MEC.

The UK relationship with the Near East today includes the disputed Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936 under which Britain has the peace-time right to station troops in the Suez Canal area. The relationship is also evident in the "Condominium" (actually dominant) status of Britain in the Sudan under the terms of the 1936 treaty and the 1899 agreement. Other British relationships include treaties of alliance with Iraq and Jordan special treaty relationships with sheikdoms and sultanates of the Arabian Peninsula, and long-standing commercial, financial and economic relationships, including oil concessions.

Antagonism to the UK is most intense in Egypt partly because Egypt has been subjected to British occupation, control, and special treaty relationship longer than any other Arab state despite original assurances that occupation was temporary. This has convinced Egypt of British bad faith, which feeling has been strengthened by the British monopoly of power in the Sudan under the nominal Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. In the rest of the Arab world, particularly in Iraq and former Arab Palestine this feeling is shared, because of experience with the Mandate System. The Arabs argue that the independence promised for their cooperation

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in World War I was largely nullified by great-power bargains for the spoils and that they assisted the allies in World War II only to be "rewarded" with a Jewish State in Palestine.

Britain's position in Egypt and the Sudan is contested by the Egyptian government, supported and sometimes led by strong nationalist Middle-group urban elements. Settlement of this controversy is indeed essential to the establishment of MEC since no other Arab state could agree to join without Egypt since this would break the arab front and undermine the Arab league. Anglo-Egyptian differences over British troops in the Canal area and rights in the Sudan will continue to plague the efforts of Western nations to establish MEC barring outstanding concessions by both sides.

The British treaties with Iraq and Jordan have been under attack, especially that with Iraq, but the astute leadership of Nuri Said, whose efforts have been directed to securing a revision of the treaty more favorable to Iraq, has so-far prevented an open conflict such as that existing between Britain and Egypt. The treaties with Egypt, Iraq and Jordan follow basically the same pattern and provide for base rights in time of peace, the exclusive right to furnish training missions, and broad rights of transit and utilization of territory in time of emergency. Hailed as a significant advance toward independence when negotiated, they have since become the primary point of attack of nationalist in both Egypt and Iraq. It is probable that British political relations with Iraq and Jordan could be adjusted to the requirements of

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an effective MEC provided the more difficult Anglo-Egyptian dispute could be settled. However there is sufficient evidence of Arab solidarity on the Anglo-Egyptian issue to cast doubt on such an adjustment apart from an Anglo-Egyptian settlement and Egyptian acceptance of MEC.

All aspects of the British position in the Near East are under attack but not with equal intensity or force throughout the area. The British treaties are regarded as an attempt to perpetuate the UK controlling position by indirect means. Under these treaties the UK is primarily responsible for the supply of arms to Iraq, Jordan and Egypt. There is considerable dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity received and resentment of UK use of its controls over arms supply as a political weapon. The conviction in the area that the UK is already the weakest of the three great powers (US, UK, and USSR), and still declining causes the Arabs to regard the UK as a "weak reed"; it is even doubted that the UK could maintain its existing Near Eastern position without repeated economic and political backing from the US. In view of past history and the obvious reluctance of the UK to relinquish any substantial part of its special position in the area, any scheme for the defense of the Near East which includes the UK among its sponsors will be viewed with suspicion in the Arab world. MEC was first announced at a critical juncture in the Anglo-Egyptian crisis and created a distinct impression in Egypt that it was a disguised continuation of the British position. The unfavorable aspects of the British relationship

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as they relate to prospects for MEC are thus the Anglo-Egyptian controversy and a broad psychological fear or doubt respecting real British intentions and capabilities. Many individuals in the area feel that the British have no intention of abandoning their special position in the area and that the MEC proposals are intended primarily to support this special position.

B. French Relationship with the Near East

French great-power and imperial interests have in the past brought it into important relationships with the Near East, many residues of which still exist. French initiative and capital built the Suez Canal, France has long claimed a special position as protector of Catholic interests, and, following World War I, France acquired a mandate over Syria and Lebanon which was only relinquished at the end of World War II. French cultural, financial, and economic interest are considerable.

Since the removal of direct French political and military responsibility in the area, there has been considerably less direct anti-French than anti-British sentiment, though French commercial and economic interests have been under local attack. Memory of the struggle for freedom from France is still vivid in the Levant, and while some cultural and economic influence may be acceptable, any open return of French forces to the area would arouse widespread opposition probably culminating in serious riots, because it would be taken as evidence of a French attempt to reestablish its former position.

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Near Eastern governments and peoples have expressed strong sympathy for the Arab peoples striving for greater freedom from French influence in North Africa. France is regarded as far more corrupt than the UK and the chief exponent of reactionary imperialism. Recent French actions in Tunisia and Morocco have roused a storm of protest throughout the Arab world and have recalled similar French actions in the Levant .

Any scheme for the defense of the Near East which includes France among its sponsors will be viewed with suspicion in the Arab states and denounced by nationalists as a plot to bring back or reinforce the influence of the former imperial power. The principal unfavorable aspect of the French relationship as it affects MEC is a deep and widespread fear and doubt of French intentions.

C. Turkish Relationship with the Near East

There is in the Near East a considerable respect for Turkish accomplishments and for Turkish strength. The Arabs have not forgotten the centuries of Turkish rule nor their struggles to gain liberation from that rule, but Turkey has shown every intention of standing by her renunciation of political aims in the Arab world.

Good relations between Turkey and the Arab States, especially Syria, were impaired by the cession by France to Turkey in 1939 of the Syrian Sanjaq of Alexandretta, as part of the price for Turkey's conclusion of a treaty of alliance with France and Great Britain. Though the Alexandretta question is the only case of direct conflict

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between Turkey and an Arab state, relations between Turkey and the Arab nations have generally been marked by coolness. Attempts at closer relations made at various times by Turkey and individual Arab states, especially Iraq and Jordan, have had little effect.

The Arabs have resented what they regard as the Turks' tendency to be neutral or even side with Israel in the Israeli-Arab dispute; and Turkey is frequently accused of having rejected its Islamic heritage in laicizing the state. Furthermore, since the Arabs feel that the elimination or reduction of Western power in the Near East is their primary goal, they are sometimes critical of Turkey for openly siding with the Western "imperialist" powers, and extreme nationalists tend to regard Turkey as a servant of the West and its interests.

The participation of Turkey as one of the four powers establishing MEC has the apparent advantage of preventing it from being an exclusively Western organization. However, Turkish participation has not increased the appeal of the proposals to the Arabs. Turkish support of MEC does not rouse the same degree of suspicion as is shown for the now-present British or the suspected French, but there is little reason to believe that Turkish military forces would be anymore acceptable to the Arab States.

D. Sentiment with Respect to the US

Sentiment in the Arab world toward the US is comparatively favorable because: (a) the US has no history of imperialism in the

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area and is believed to have no territorial ambitions; (b) American cultural and educational activities have tended to friendly feelings toward the US; (c) the US has encouraged Arab aspirations toward independence; (d) the US is believed to be the strongest military power in the world and has replaced the UK as the nation with the most prestige; and (e) the US is known to be liberal and open handed and many believe that the US may generously supply arms to the Arab states without demanding too much of a quid pro quo.

Unfavorable attitudes toward the US are due to (a) the US position on the Palestine issue and (b) the belief that because of US military and other ties with Western Europe, it tends to support British and French power and influence in the Arab world.

The Arab governments and peoples generally feel that US support of partition and of the Zionist cause is responsible for the creation of the State of Israel and the train of problems resulting therefrom, especially the close of a million homeless Arab refugees.

Furthermore, the Arabs believe any US line of action toward the Near East will be influenced by Israeli and Zionist pressures. This impression has been strengthened by statements made by prominent US Government officials, who have referred to Israel as "the bastion of democracy in the Near East."

On balance, in spite of the undoubted loss in popularity and prestige suffered by the US because of the Arab belief of US support for Israel,

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the US as such is more acceptable as a partner in the defense of the area than the UK, France or Turkey. Nevertheless it is probable that the participation of the US is regarded as the most hopeful element in the MEC proposals, because of the American "non-imperialist" record, and the belief that the US may strengthen the Arab states without binding them by "unequal" treaties or interfering in their internal affairs.

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E. Sentiment with Respect to the USSR

Anti-Soviet feeling in the Arab states is strongest in the small upper circle -- landowners, ruling houses, and long-established politicians who have a higher degree of awareness of world events and who have the most to lose through an upset of the status quo. The vast majority of the population has little if any knowledge of foreign affairs and, if it has any ideas about the Soviets at all, is vaguely suspicious of the latter because of their hostility toward religion, but this tends to be counterbalanced by an impression that the USSR is a powerful state.

The small politically conscious urban element is led by professional and white collar men but extends into the groups of urban workers, artisans and small business men. Many of the leaders are frequently only semi-educated by western standards and their political horizon does not extend beyond the Arab world. This middle element regards the present Western-Soviet conflict at best as principally one between two rival power blocs and tends to sympathize with the USSR as the opponent of their established enemies, the French and the British. Never having experienced Russian occupation and control they do not regard the USSR as a threat but as a useful counterweight and lever against the West. In the opinion of this middle element, by joining MEC the Arabs would be openly associating themselves with the Western camp of those who have betrayed them in the past and would thus lose their principal bargaining position which they may never attain again. Thus local sentiment with regard to the USSR does not on balance constitute a favorable factor for MEC.

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F. Israel and the Palestine Issue

Antagonism between Israel and the Arab states is among the most important elements operating against Arab acceptance of MEC because of the following factors: a) the establishment of Israel has broken the geographic and ethnic unity of the Arab states, which is a cardinal point in the ideology of Arab nationalism; b) it represents to the Arabs the prime example of Western disregard of Arab interests and rights; c) it has created in the Arab world an obsession with regard to the primacy of the security threat posed by a militant Israel which is kept alive by the constant irritants of border incidents and the high rate of immigration into Israel; d) the continuous deterioration of the economic situation in Israel makes it necessary for the US to extend increasing financial and other aid to Israel which helps build up Israel militarily as well as economically and intensifies Arab complaints that the US for internal political reasons regards Israel as more important than the Arabs; e) the Arabs have established an economic blockade and a boycott against Israel which makes impossible the joint use of Arab and Israeli territory and prevents land communications between Egypt and the other Arab states; and f) no Arab government could agree to participate in an MEC which included Israel without being in immediate danger of repudiation and loss of power.

Israel, in its turn, is primarily concerned with the threat of another Arab attack, beside which the possibility of a threat from the USSR is regarded as definitely secondary. Any MEC program which

strengthened the Arab states would be violently opposed. Further, most prominent Israelis have frequently stated their belief that only Israel and Turkey could provide effective support for a Western defense of the Middle East.

The outlook for the improvement of MEC prospects through the lessening of Arab-Israeli tension is not bright. While there is a general agreement in Israel that it is desirable for the country some day to reach a settlement with the Arabs, there is little drive in this direction, in part due to the influence of the army. In general, Israel feels that by building up its military strength and with continued support from the US it can get along without making concessions to the Arabs.

G. The Arab League

The Arab League has recognized a need for the military as well as the political and economic cooperation of the Arab states by drawing up a collective security pact which has been signed by all League member states. This pact makes apparent a factor which is favorable to MEC, namely that it recognizes the need for the collective defense of the Arab states. The most unfavorable aspect, however, is the difference in the fundamental objectives of the two concepts: MEC is directed at the USSR while the League pact is undoubtedly directed against Israel. This in itself is indicative of the wide disparity of outlook between Western and Arab concepts of Middle Eastern security. The League pact is an imprecise and loosely-worded document which,

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while proclaiming that an attack on one is an attack on all and acknowledging the need for coordination of Arab military forces, leaves the implementation of these principles to an Arab military committee which is almost certain to fall afoul of personal, dynastic, and national jealousies and fail to produce anything effective.

The significance of the pact lies not only in its primary objective, but in the fact that the Arab states consider that the defense of their territory is primarily the concern of themselves, not of outsiders, and that it is up to them to determine who are their enemies and their friends. Any attempt, such as MEC, made by an outside power or powers tends therefore to be regarded as a usurpation of Arab prerogatives and as motivated by ulterior aims. The Arab League, which sponsored the pact, has been violently anti-Western because of the Palestine, Anglo-Egyptian, and North African issues. Turkey, with which alone the League has no outstanding score to settle, is regarded with vague suspicion by Egypt, the leading member of the League, as a possible rival for Middle Eastern leadership. Thus the fact that the League Collective Security Pact has been signed and exists at least on paper would make it necessary for MEC to reckon with it in attempting to organize the defense of the area.

H. Nationalism

Arab nationalism is not a new factor in the Near East. It manifested itself against Ottoman control before World War I. When the settlement following World War I fell short of Arab national

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ambitions and instead of the promised independent Arab state established great power mandates in the area, nationalist agitation turned against the mandatory and protecting powers, Great Britain and France.

Nationalism in the Arab region has two main aspects. On the negative side it aims at freedom from foreign control and establishment of full independence and sovereignty; on the positive side it is directed toward the attainment of a vague goal of Arab unity. Only comparatively rarely does nationalism manifest itself as patriotic loyalty to the individual Arab state. This is particularly true in the Fertile Crescent area where the states created after World War I lie within more or less artificial boundaries drawn in accordance with Great Power interests rather than historical and political development of the region. Though the resultant dynastic and political rivalries have so far prevented the development of any effective Arab union, the ideal of Arabism, that is the drive for solidarity and unity, is the main ideology in the Arab World. Thus the Arab approach to world problems is parochial and subjective and quite different from that of the Western powers. Expressed in terms of security the main interest is not in Middle East security but in Arab security.

The most recent experience of the Arab states has been with Western imperial control, and the negative manifestations of Arab nationalism are therefore primarily directed against the West. Since the UK has remained the sole Western power with a residual imperial position, nationalist attacks have centered upon the UK and its treaty

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rights in the Arab states. Every move on the part of other powers which could be interpreted as aiding the shrinking British power position is liable to be regarded with suspicion if not outright hostility by the Arab states.

Owing to the structure of Arab society, nationalism is not an all-pervasive force. The broad masses of the population at the bottom of the social pyramid have little or no concept of broad political forces and their interest is concentrated upon the problems of eking out a livelihood. Their allegiance is not to ideals of Arabism or a nation state; but follows the traditional lines of allegiance to a small grouping, be it tribal, religious or sectional. The strength of nationalism that manifests itself in the Near East today lies in the middleclass urban educated groups who have been exposed to Western culture and ideologies. To date most of their demands have been directed against the foreigners not only because a large portion of the visible wealth of these countries and of the means of production has been under foreign control, but also because the feeling is widespread in that group that the traditional ruling group composed of wealthy landlords, tribal leaders, and professional politicians has been kept in power largely by foreign support. In addition ideas of Islamic renaissance have been closely linked to Arab nationalism and have lent it the increasing impetus of religious emotionalism.

The members of the ruling group have not infrequently had at least some sympathy for nationalist aims and in addition have found

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anti-foreignism a convenient scape-goat to divert pressures by the middle group from themselves. As nationalist forces become stronger and the urban middle group grows in size and political importance, it is becoming harder and harder for the politicians within the ruling groups to manipulate or counteract the forces of anti-foreign nationalism even though many of them realize that their own survival is closely related to the maintenance of Western power. They are increasingly faced with the need of compromising with anti-foreignism.

In both its positive and its negative manifestations nationalism is a force unfavorable to MEC. To most nationalists MEC, with its prominent participation of the West appears as just another scheme to reinforce the Western power position in the Near East and to bolster waning British power. In addition there is the difficulty of reconciling the broad aims of MEC with the narrow concept of Arabism which might necessitate a choice of either centering MEC on the Arab area with a supporting role for Turkey and the West, or of imposing a Western-dominated MEC on an unwilling Arab region.

I. Neutrality

To a large degree neutrality is a corollary of anti-foreign nationalism. It has its basis in the same traits of Arab character which gave rise to the concept of Arabism. Centering his thoughts and actions upon the Arab world and its specific goals, the Arab does not consider himself part of "one world" or a community of "free nations". A world conflict which involves the Arab nations principally as a

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strategic prize does not interest him except insofar as he can exploit it to Arab advantage. Doubts about the effectiveness of Western defense of the Middle East reinforce this attitude. To many neutralists the fruits reaped in World War II by Switzerland and Turkey through neutrality and by Denmark through non-defense may be tempting especially when contrasted with the destruction wrought in other countries who sided with the West, were occupied by the enemy and subsequently liberated. The Arabs do not want to be "liberated". In most cases neutralists lack the political sophistication to see the essential and to Western eyes obvious differences between the position of the Arab countries today and Turkey and Switzerland in World War II.

Among the ruling groups there are influential segments who believe that there is no hope for enduring neutrality for the Near Eastern region and that their own and their countries' interests would be served best by association with the West. However, as in the case of nationalism these groups are hampered by strong popular pressures and are in most cases unwilling to stake their own political future upon a strong stand against neutralism.

Neutralism is thus strongly unfavorable to MEC unless a convincing case can be made, from the Arab point of view, for the identification of their self-interest with the interest of the West in the area or Western force becomes so overwhelming as to persuade the Arabs that Western defense of the Near East will be effective and Western victory in the overall conflict certain.

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III. PROSPECTS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INCLUSIVE MEC
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(To be furnished March 6)

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